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ORIGINAL PAPER

Shifting perceptions of food security and land in the context of labour out-migration in rural Nepal

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Abstract This paper presents the results of a survey of the livelihoods of people living in the eastern part of the subtropical plains of Nepal, known as the *terai*. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used in the survey and further data were obtained through focus group discussions, in-depth interviews with key informants and participant observations. Changes were recorded both in the perception of agricultural and residential land for a secure living and the meaning given to food security. The principal drivers causing these changes were voluntary out-migration for remunerative employment, urbanization and the reluctance of members of the younger generation to farm, which they regard as a "dirty job". In consequence, people's livelihood practices and access to food are gradually shifting from an agriculture-based economy to an economy that is based on other sources of income, including remittances from out-migrants. This development threatens not only the role of agriculture in rural livelihoods but also the food security of the country.

Keywords Labour out-migration · Agriculture · Food security · Generations · Nepal

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Introduction

Nepal is experiencing social, economic and cultural transformations resulting in remarkable changes in the meanings attached to agricultural land and food security. Labour out-migration is one of the important drivers of such changes. Although Nepali migrants have been sending their earnings to their families for about 200 years (Adhikari 2006), the growth of labour out-migration in the past few decades is unprecedented (Seddon et al. 2002; Thieme and Wyss 2005). The migrant population has increased from about 88,000 in 1942 (cf. Kansakar 1984) to more than four million in 2008 (The World Bank 2009). In 2008/09, remittances contributed about 30 per cent to the country's gross domestic product (The World Bank 2009). Out-migration in Nepal is mostly international: 77 per cent to India and 15 per cent to the Gulf countries (CBS 2001). While women make up about half the world's migrant population (Ramirez et al. 2005), 90 per cent of Nepalese migrants are men (CBS 2004).

In labour out-migration, the loss of labour and subsequent infusion of remittances greatly affects the value attached to land ownership, agriculture and food security in the source communities. Some studies postulate that labour migration undermines agricultural development and leads to loss of labour and abandonment of the agricultural sector because the majority of remittances are spent on basic needs, education, health and conspicuous consumption. However, the literature also shows that remittances overcome labour shortfalls and provide capital inputs to agricultural improvement (Durand et al. 1996). At the same time, all over the world labour out-migration is an important strategy to enhance livelihood security of farming households (Adger et al. 2002; De Haan et al. 2002; Lipton 1980). As food security is an aspect of livelihood security (Frankenberger and McCaston 1998) labour out-

migration can be seen as a strategy to increase household food security. A common definition of food security is 'secure access at all times to sufficient food for a healthy life' (Maxwell and Frankenberger 1992: 8), but subjective meanings and sociocultural manifestations of food security are also important (Balatibat 2004; Den Hartog et al. 2006). However, the latter aspects seem to be insufficiently acknowledged in the literature. Likewise, the contemporary literature shows a narrow focus on poor, vulnerable, and food insecure households, while food secure households also attach certain meanings to food security, particularly in relation to land ownership.

This paper aims to shed light on how different social groups perceive the significance of land ownership for food security in Jhapa, a district with a high out-migration rate, located in south-eastern Nepal. We show how rural people perceive the importance of agricultural land for food security and how this is changing over time between generations. We also consider variation among socioeconomic and caste/ethnic groups, but the main focus is on intergenerational differences.

The conventional way of looking at food security uses the perspective of its physical availability and accessibility (Maxwell 1996; Maxwell and Frankenberger 1992; Migotto et al. 2005), relating accessibility to entitlements (Sen 1981). Starting from this, we then show the changing perceptions of food security across generations, from (agricultural) land as a primary means for producing food to accessing food from other sources, yet keeping land as a status symbol. These local perceptions are viewed in the light of two Nepalese government policy papers: the Agricultural Perspective Plan (APP)—1995[1] and the Foreign Employment Act (FEA)—2007,[2] which have implications for livelihood generation and food security under conditions of labour out-migration. The former envisages development as primarily based on agriculture and natural resources, while the latter recognises the significance of remittances as an important element for development (cf. Sharma 2008). Indeed, Nepal's conventional development discourse, with its centrality on agriculture and natural resources, is shifting towards the significance of people's mobility in generating livelihoods and attaining food security. Through this paper we invite researchers and policy makers to think about the future of Nepal's food security where male adults from land-owning households are migrating out and the younger people now look down on agriculture as a profession.

Land, migration and food security

Land is not only a natural resource, but also a social, economic, political and cultural resource, important for generating livelihoods. It is both a means of production and a status symbol, determining to a great extent an individual's standard of living in rural communities. In Nepal, the distribution and ownership of land is greatly skewed according to class, gender and ethnicity (Upreti 2008). Land has a complicated and multi-dimensional relationship with the phenomenon of migration. Scarcity of land is a push factor for people to migrate to other areas where there is plenty of land (Gartaula and Niehof 2010), while the remittances may be invested in land on return. Moreover, Gartaula and Niehof (2010) argue that not only people move but also that their motives for moving are not static. According to them, while the motivation of earlier migration to Nepal's *terai* region (the subtropical Gangetic plains in the southern part of the country) was the search for agricultural land, contemporary out-migration from the *terai* is inspired by the aspirations of upward mobility and a better quality of life.

Labour migration shows a variety of movements of individuals from rural to urban areas within and across country boundaries (Skeldon 1997; Spaan 1999). In this paper, labour out-migration is the movement of individuals or groups of individuals to live temporarily away from home for the purpose of working and earning money, not for other purposes such as study or marriage. Migrant households are defined as households with at least one member absent for at least six months during the past five years to work elsewhere. Labour out-migration comprises two simultaneous processes: labour goes out and remittances come in. Remittances can have productive and consumption uses, both relating to household food security. Productive use aims at long-term security, whereas consumption use satisfies immediate needs. The way remittances are spent largely depends on whether people find it important to spend them on immediate consumption or invest them for long-term productive use. The literature shows different uses of remittances pertaining to the attainment of food security. In Ecuador, for example, the majority of households invests remittances in the purchase of agricultural land, but few invest in agricultural inputs (Jokisch 2002). Mexican migrants tend to improve their housing back home instead of investing remittances in agricultural improvement (Durand et al. 1996). Similarly, De Brauw and Rozelle (2008) found a significant relationship between migration and investment in housing and other consumer durables in rural China.

[1] The APP is the 20-year plan of the government of Nepal supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) aiming to increase agricultural productivity, expand employment opportunities in agriculture, put subsistence agriculture onto a commercial basis, and make agriculture a precondition of economic transformation and prestigious occupation (Cameron 1998).

[2] The Foreign Employment Act aims "to make foreign employment business safe, managed and decent, and protect the rights and interests of workers who go for foreign employment and the foreign employment entrepreneurs, while promoting that business" (GON 2007: 1).

Food security is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon comprising not only adequate nutrition but also social purposes and cultural meanings (Den Hartog et al. 2006; Niehof 2010). Moreover, objective indicators of food security do not necessarily correspond to how people value food and perceive food security. Balatibat (2004) compared different meanings of food security for men and women in coastal and lowland areas in the Philippines and Migotto et al. (2005) compared objective indicators with subjective perceptions of the adequacy of food consumption. Maxwell and Frankenberger (1992: 4) distinguished four conceptual aspects of food security: i) sufficiency of food, defined mainly as the calories needed for an active and healthy life; ii) access to food, defined by entitlements to produce, purchase or exchange food or receive it as a gift; iii) security, defined as the balance between vulnerability, risk and insurance; and iv) a temporal aspect where food insecurity can be chronic, transitory or cyclical. Common to these aspects is the emphasis on availability of and access to food, which can be acquired either from own production or from purchase, exchange, borrowing of food and receiving gifts of food. Since the seminal work of Sen (1981) there have been simultaneous shifts in the discourse from a supply orientation to one emphasising distribution and access through entitlements. The study of food security has thus shifted its focus from the availability and access at regional or national levels to household-level access to food (Niehof 2010).

In the wake of modernization processes and urbanization, food provision by own production has declined and the acquisition of food by other means has increased. This paper is framed within the changing social, cultural and policy contexts that act upon people's livelihood practices and access to food, which show a shift from an agriculture-based economy to an economy based on flows of remittances and non-agricultural sources of income. Using this framework, we investigate how land, food security and labour out-migration, and the relationships among them are perceived differently by the different social groups and across the generations, and how land ownership has acquired a new meaning. By doing so, we advance the works of Sen (1981), Maxwell and Frankenberger (1992), Balatibat (2004), and Migotto et al. (2005) to define food security by incorporating the perceptions about accessing food among different social groups in the context of societal change.

Research location and methods

Jhapa district was selected because of its dynamic history of in- and out-migration and its location in the *terai* region, which is considered the granary of the country. Among the three ecological zones of Nepal (high mountain, mid hills and the *terai*), the *terai* is an extension of the flood plain of the Ganges River in India (Fig. 1). The *terai* is good for lowland rice-based agriculture. Hence, food security in the Jhapa district is an important issue because changes in food production in the *terai* may have a direct impact on the overall food production of the country in the long run.

Within Jhapa district, Maharani Jhoda Village Development Committee (VDC) was the actual location of the research. Among the 47 VDCs and three municipalities of the district, Maharani Jhoda has a high incidence of out-migration. The available historical sources indicate that the settlement dates from 1912–13. In-migration increased in the late 1950s once the government had opened up the *terai* for settlement after the eradication of malaria. While in-migration continued, out-migration began in the mid-1970s and has been increasing ever

Fig. 1 Map of Nepal showing the study area. *Source*: Integrated Centre for Integrated Mountain Development

since. However, the nature of in- and out-migration is different: in-migration took the form of permanent family migration, while out-migration is a temporary individual activity for the purpose of obtaining paid work. Maharani Jhoda has a population of 10,589 distributed among about 1980 households (DDC 2006). It is located at 56 kilometres west of the district headquarters and 550 kilometres east of the country's capital, Kathmandu. There are two market centres in Maharani Jhoda: Doramari and School Chaun Bazaar. The latter is also the VDC centre where the VDC office and other governmental offices are situated. Twice a week on market days, people go to the market, even if they do not have anything to buy or sell. This is not just a custom, but also an indication of unemployment. In fact, the growth of these market centres has led to the establishment of the offices of manpower agencies and money transfer organisations, which facilitate the labour out-migration process.

Farming of wetland, rain-fed rice is the dominant cropping system in the study area. There is no surface irrigation system, but over 50 per cent of households have installed motorized pumps, which draw water from underground boreholes. Irrigation water from boreholes is needed mainly for spring season rice (April–June) and other winter season crops such as wheat, hybrid maize, mustard, potato and green vegetables. Summer (June–August) is the rainy season and the main season for rice cultivation, during which natural streams or small irrigation channels dug by the farmers can meet the water demand of the crop. There is not much agricultural mechanization in the area; most agricultural activities such as hoeing, seeding, transplanting seedlings and harvesting are done manually by men and women.

Both qualitative and quantitative research approaches were applied. Qualitative data were collected using key informant interviews, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and participant observation, whereas quantitative data were collected through a survey. The fieldwork started in June 2008 and consisted of three partly overlapping phases.[3] The first phase mainly comprised an assessment of migration among 1,791 households (90 per cent of the households of Maharani Jhoda VDC) with the main purpose of preparing a sampling frame for the household survey conducted in the second phase (Feb–May 2009). The household survey was carried out among 277 households using stratified random sampling. In the third phase (Aug–Dec 2009), we interviewed 26 persons, comprising older and younger people, wives of migrant workers, returned migrants, local political leaders and early settlers as key informants in order to gain in-depth knowledge and elicit subjective experiences. We have used parts of these interviews for this paper. Excel and PASW Statistics 17.0 were used for quantitative data analysis.

The sampled households were categorized on the basis of migration status, household headship, age of the household head and caste/ethnicity, in order to compare landholding size and food supply from own production. Table 1 presents the categories of households used for the quantitative analysis. We used content analysis for analysing the qualitative data about subjective perceptions of land and food security. Qualitative content analysis is specifically used for subjective interpretation of the text data grounded on a systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns to produce descriptions or typologies, along with expressions from subjects reflecting how they view their social world (Zhang and Wildemuth 2009).

Results and discussion

The results are organized under three thematic headings. First, we describe the demographic characteristics of the respondents, variation in landholding, agriculture and other means of obtaining a living, mainly based on the household categories we defined in Table 1 above. Second, we present the results on food security using the indicators of availability of and access to food. Finally, we present the valuation of agriculture and agricultural land by the different social categories in terms of generation and poverty or relative wealth. We show how the older generation is straightforward about the value of agricultural land for secure access to

Table 1 Household categories

Characteristics	N	%
Migration		
Yes	136	49.1
No	141	50.9
Household headship		
Male headed	198	71.5
De-jure female headed	34	12.3
De-facto female headed	45	16.2
Age household head		
≤40 years	77	27.8
41–64 years	140	50.5
≥65 years	60	21.7
Caste/ethnicity		
Hill Brahmin/Chhetri	157	56.7
Hill Janajati	59	21.3
Hill Dalit	11	4.0
Terai Janajati	34	12.3
Other Terai	16	5.8
Total	277	100.0

Source: Household survey 2009

[3] The first author of this paper conducted fieldwork from June 2008 to December 2009.

food, while the younger generation is ambivalent about agriculture and investing in land. Also we show that food secure and food insecure households have different options and make different choices in linking agriculture and agricultural land to food security. The results are presented in the order of first quantitative and then qualitative data, while the two are obviously related. The quantitative results provide an overview of the availability and accessibility of food in relation to landholding, agriculture and market infrastructure. The qualitative results show how perceptions about food security are changing over time and across the social groups, especially with regard to the role of agriculture and agricultural land as a primary means of production.

Respondent characteristics

The household survey covered 277 households and 1581 persons (average household size 5.7). For migrant households, the average household size was 6.3, for non-migrant households it was 5.1. It is important to note that migrants are considered household members. The average size of younger households (age of household head ≤40 years) was the lowest—4.5, compared to households with heads aged 41–64 years—6.1 and those aged 65 and above—6.3. With regard to ethnicity, the Hill Janajati group was found to have the highest number of household members—6.2, followed by the Hill Brahmin Chhetri—5.7, the Hill Dalit and the Other Terai—5.3, and the Terai Janajati: 5.2. Average age of the household head was 52 ranging from 18 to 95.

Among the 244 absent household members (0.9 per household), 189 (77.5 per cent) had migrated for work. Most of the migrant population is male (87 %), married (82 %), young (average age 29), and unskilled (60 %), working in both formal and informal sectors at their destination. Apart from migrating to the country's big cities, international destinations were Qatar, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, India and other Gulf countries.

Landholding and agriculture

Almost three-quarters (71.8 %) of the sampled households have land for both agriculture and residential purposes (referred to as the total landholding size in this paper), while 22.7 per cent have only residential land and 5.4 per cent have no land at all. Average total landholding size per household is 0.80 ha, ranging from 0.008 to 3.99 ha. For agricultural landholding, the average is 0.94 ha ranging from 0.06 to 3.33 ha. Table 2 presents the distribution of

Table 2 Landholding by household type

Household type	Total land (ha)			Agricultural land (ha)		
	Mean	SD	N (%)	Mean	SD	N (%)
Migration						
Yes	0.83	0.76	134 (51.1)	0.91	0.68	108 (54.3)
No	0.77	0.77	128 (48.9)	0.97	0.69	91 (45.7)
Total	0.80	0.76	262 (100.0)	0.94	0.68	199 (100.0)
p-value	>0.05			>0.05		
F-ratio	0.344			0.349		
Age group						
≤40 years	0.38	0.39	72 (27.5)	0.51	0.36	47 (23.6)
41–64 years	0.83	0.76	132 (50.4)	0.95	0.66	102 (51.3)
≥65 years	1.24	0.86	58 (22.1)	1.31	0.74	50 (25.1)
Total	0.80	0.76	262 (100.0)	0.94	0.68	199 (100.0)
p-value	<0.001			<0.001		
F-ratio	23.673			20.163		
Caste/Ethnicity						
Hill Brahmin/Chhetri	0.97	0.80	152 (58.0)	0.98	0.72	134 (51.1)
Hill Janajati	0.82	0.66	55 (21.0)	0.95	0.55	43 (16.4)
Hill Dalit	0.09	0.15	10 (3.8)	0.22	0.21	3 (1.1)
Terai Janajati	0.45	0.64	32 (12.2)	0.74	0.63	17 (6.5)
Other Terai	0.08	0.09	13 (5.0)	0.18	0.12	2 (0.8)
Total	0.80	0.76	262 (100.0)	0.94	0.68	199 (100.0)
p-value	<0.001			>0.05		
F-ratio	9.621			2.019		

The average of total landholding size appears to be less than the average agricultural landholding because 63 households do not have agricultural land. The size of residential land is generally smaller than that of agricultural land, which depresses the mean value of total landholding size because of the higher frequency of households without agricultural land

Source: Household survey 2009

total and agricultural landholding among land-owning households per category. As 15 households were landless, the total number of households with land is 262. Of those households, 63 did not have agricultural land, leaving 199 households with agricultural land.

The highly significant results on the variation of landholding size according to age of the household head indicate that younger households own less land than older households. The ratio of agricultural land to total landholding size is 0.65 among younger households (age household head ≤40), while it is 0.77 for the age group 41–64 and 0.86 for those aged 65 and above. The intergenerational differences can be explained by land fragmentation as a result of the inheritance system that leads to a declining size per generation. Regarding ethnicity, the Hill Brahmin/Chhetri group owns more land than the other groups. This result is in line with the group's political and historical dominance in the state machinery, and reflected in their historically greater access to land and capital compared to other caste/ethnic groups (Upreti 2008). In terms of migration, migrant households have slightly higher total landholding size, while non-migrant households have higher agricultural landholding. This indicates migrants' orientation away from adding more agricultural land.

To see whether there is an association between landholding and household types (including household size) we performed a correlation analysis. The correlation matrix presented in Table 3 shows that landholding is positively correlated with household size, age of household head and caste/ethnicity while it is negatively correlated with gender of the household head. A positive, though not significant, correlation of migration with total landholding and negative with agricultural landholding seems to indicate that migrant households tend to buy residential land.

More than 80 per cent of the households reported agriculture as the primary means of living, while 10.1 per cent depended on wage labour, 6.5 per cent on local business, and 2.2 per cent on the service sector. None of the respondents reported foreign employment as their primary source of income. As a secondary source of income, however, over 40 per cent households received remittances from their migrant members in the previous year. Though most of the respondents were said to be farmers, the contributions from other sources to their livelihoods has become increasingly important. The findings of our study are similar to Roa's (2007) findings for the Philippines viz. farming households engage in a mixture of off-farm and non-farm work, such as seasonal and part-time work and part- or full-time migration. Although in our case people say they are farmers, in fact their livelihood depends significantly on other sources of income. Hence, being a farmer (or a fisher, as in Roa's study) is not only a livelihood but also an identity. This would also explain why having land in the *terai* is regarded as contributing to social status, irrespective of the use of the land (see below).

Food security: production and access

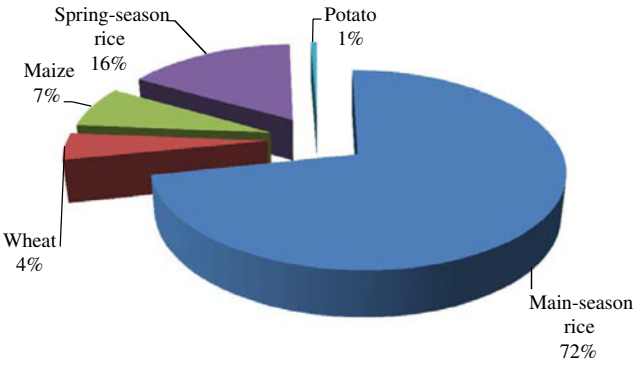
Rice is the staple food, even to the extent that rice is used as a metaphor for food. Not having rice to eat is considered not having proper food, no matter whatever other food may be available. Food security in terms of production of and access to rice does not seem to be a problem in the research area, considering both exogenous and endogenous factors. By endogenous factors we mean those factors that play a role in the farming system and household income generation. Exogenous factors are the connections of households with the outside world. We estimated the share of the five main food crops grown in the area. Out of 376 ha of land covered by the five main crops in the year prior to the survey, almost three-quarters (72 %) was used for main-season rice and another 16 per cent for spring-season rice (Fig. 2).

Table 3 Correlations of landholding size with selected variables

Variables	Pearson Correlation Coefficient			
	Total land	N	Agricultural land	N
Household size	0.417**	262	0.384**	199
Age household head	0.401**	262	0.410**	199
Sex household head (0=*de-jure* female, 1=male, 2=*de-facto* female)	−0.217**	262	−0.270**	199
Migration status (1=Yes, 0=No)	0.036	262	−0.042	199
Caste/Ethnicity (1=Hill Brahmin/Chhetri, 0=Other ethnic groups)	0.263**	262	0.103	199

**$p<0.01$

Source: Household survey 2009



Source: Household survey 2009

Fig. 2 Land covered by five main crops in the year prior to the survey

Looking at the endogenous picture first, data show that over 75 per cent of the households can produce food for year-round consumption. Table 4 provides a more detailed overview with variation according to household type: migrant, older generation and Hill Brahmin/ Chhetri households supply more food from their own land than the non-migrant, younger generation and other caste/ethnic households. Among the 67 households not producing enough for their own consumption (i.e. sufficient for less than 10 months of the year), about 57 per cent reported that they compensate from remittances, whereas 19 per cent depended on local trade and businesses, and 24 per cent managed to buy their food from wages or salary.

Comparing households based on landholding size and food supply from their own production, interesting patterns can be observed. Firstly, the greater the landholding size, the higher the food supply and the higher the tendency of out-migration. While the former can be expected, the latter contradicts the notion of migration as a last-resort livelihood option for the landless poor (Gill 2003; Golay 2006; Shrestha 1988) and supports the notion of migration as a voluntary strategy for pursuing a better quality of life (Niehof 2004). The findings are also in line with the argument of a disjuncture on the authoritative discourse of viewing migration as problem and migrants as aberrant, but rather seeing migration as a part of a way of life of the actors involved (Sharma 2008). Secondly, the younger households have less access to own production compared to older households, which is partly explained by their smaller landholding size and their orientation away from agriculture. This development is explained in detail in the section on the valuation of land below.

To illustrate the influence of exogenous factors, we present a section from the fieldwork diary of the first author:

> In the afternoon, I went to School Choun to observe *haat bazaar* (open-market). It was market day. The market was getting busier compared to the previous market days. Many people came to do some shopping or just to visit. This was because by now almost all households had finished rice transplanting. After *maijaro* [the last day of rice transplanting of the season], people like to go to the open market to meet friends and buy provisions for their household needs. (Fieldwork diary, 8.8.2008)

Table 4 Food supply from own production by household type

Household type	Food supply from own production (%)					
	12 months and more	10–12 months	7–9 months	4–6 months	3 months and less	Total
Migration						
Yes	75 (49.7)	36 (61.0)	8 (50.0)	6 (54.5)	11 (27.5)	136 (49.1)
No	76 (50.3)	23 (39.0)	8 (50.0)	5 (45.5)	29 (72.5)	141 (50.9)
Pearson Chi-Square=10.97, $p<0.05$						
Age group						
≤40 years	26 (17.2)	17 (28.8)	7 (43.8)	8 (72.7)	19 (47.5)	77 (27.8)
≥41 years	125 (82.8)	42 (71.2)	9 (56.2)	3 (27.3)	21 (52.5)	200 (72.2)
Pearson Chi-Square=29.28, $p<0.001$						
Caste/Ethnicity						
Hill Brahmin/Chhetri	103 (68.2)	38 (64.4)	4 (25.0)	5 (45.5)	7 (17.5)	157 (56.7)
Other ethnic groups	48 (31.8)	21 (35.6)	12 (75.0)	6 (54.5)	33 (82.5)	120 (43.3)
Pearson Chi-Square=41.72, $p<0.001$						
Total	151 (54.5)	59 (21.3)	16 (5.8)	11 (4.0)	40 (14.4)	277 (100.0)

Source: Household survey 2009

Market places are important in the research area. Men and women habitually go to the markets at regular intervals. On market days, most of the items sold are food items, especially vegetables, meat and fish. As we can see in the two pictures in Fig. 3, people go and buy their necessities at open-air stalls in the market. The first picture shows the kinds of food items (seasonal vegetables) available in the market and the second shows the interaction between a seller and her customers.

The circulation of food items has become easy due to good connections with other market centres. In the VDC, School Choun is the main meeting point of villagers. Since the time of its establishment in the mid-twentieth century, the market has undergone many changes in terms of accessibility. The area can now be accessed through a gravel road and there is a bus service to Damak, a bigger town and regional centre that connects to the main cities of the country through the east–west highway. It takes about 30 minutes by bus to reach Damak from School Choun.

Agricultural values and food security

During the past 20 years, the value of agricultural work and agricultural land has been changing. We here present the views of people from different social groups with the help of three cases and an excerpt from a focus group discussion. The three cases are a selection from several cases that were documented. They clearly illustrate differences in the perceptions about agriculture and agricultural land for food security between the older and younger generations and between resource-poor and relatively wealthier households. Case 1 shows the interface between a father and his sons of the same household based on several interviews with them. Case 2 is about a resource-poor household (as compared to Cases 1 and 3) where remittances have significantly contributed to household food security. Case 3 pictures an older couple that value agriculture as the only secure means of accessing food, supporting the view of the father in Case 1. Finally, the excerpt from a focus group discussion with younger men supports the views of the sons in Case 1, who are evidently caught in a dilemma. We did not find differences per caste/ethnicity and gender in the perceptions of agriculture and agricultural land for food security. Thus, cases and analyses focus on generational and socioeconomic differences.

Case 1: A matter of choice: agricultural and residential land in a well-to-do household

DB (63), father of six sons and three daughters, lives with his wife and the wives of his two migrant sons. All of his sons have worked outside the village at least once in their life. Currently, five of them still work abroad, while one retired from the Nepal Army in 2007. DB would like his sons and grandsons to escape the hardships he experienced. He wants the best investment of the remittances sent by his sons which, for him, means investing remittances in *khet* (agricultural land), so that in the future he can distribute sufficient land among his sons to run their households. This is why the family has more than five hectares of land now, compared to less than two hectares before the first son migrated in 1992. But some of his sons are no longer interested in investing their remittances in agricultural land. The fifth son said: "*I would never think of continuing agriculture after my final return. I don't like to do this dirty job anymore. I have bought a piece of ghaderi (residential land) at Kakadbhitta [a town near the Indian border, about 60 km northeast of the research area] where I can run a business later on*". (DPB, 2.10.2008)

However, DB did not listen to his sons because he wanted to make sure each son would have at least one *bigha* (0.66 ha). As he said, he is not going to take land with him when he dies. He only wants each son to have sufficient land to live on. Apart from their father's investment in

Fig. 3 Friday market at School Choun bazaar, (**a**) seasonal vegetables available in the market and (**b**) interaction between a seller and her customers

agricultural land, the sons have their own investments in residential plots. For example, the first and second sons bought one plot each in Gauradaha; the third son has built his own house at Surunga; the fifth son has just bought a plot in Kakadbhitta; and the fourth son was looking for a plot somewhere in Gauradaha at the time of the fieldwork. The last son is new to the migration process, but he will also eventually buy his own plot somewhere. Investment in a residential plot is not just to build a house, but also to get high returns of the remittances because the price of residential land is increasing, unlike that of agricultural land. DB's second son said:

> "*For the plots we bought at Gauradaha three years ago, we paid 250,000 rupees per* kaththa*, but now they can be sold for more than 800,000 rupees per* kaththa*. Sometimes, I feel like why did we buy so much of agricultural land instead of buying several residential plots in town?*" (SBR, 21.4.2009)

Case 2: Not a matter of choice: a resource-poor migrant household

What to buy and what not to buy is not so much an issue for resource-poor farmers, as they have very little choice. As a *de-facto* female head of household, BMS (34) is living with her two children: a daughter (14) and a son (12), both studying at a private boarding school at School Choun. She wants her children to be educated, as she herself did not get the opportunity to go to school and is illiterate. For the last four years, her husband has been working in Qatar. Though his migration yields little surplus money, the remittances mean a lot to them. She said the following about her husband's migration and the use of remittances:

> "*So far, I have no surplus from his earnings. I got terribly sick last year which took a huge amount of money, managed from the money he sent. I don't know what I would do if I would not have had his money last year. We had a very small house, which we replaced with this one. […] Well, I am not sure whether my social position is getting better, but his migration is giving something to us. We were able to send our children to a private school [they used to go to the government school before] and we don't have to borrow food from others. As we don't have much land (0.17 ha) we would otherwise have to borrow money from moneylenders to buy food. From his earnings, I have installed a tube-well on the farm and bought an electric water pump. Because of this, now I can grow rice twice a year, which is enough for us to eat for the whole year".* (BMS, 23.12.2009)

This transcript reveals that BMS does not have much land for cultivation and depends on remittances to fulfil the needs of her family. She chose to spend remittances on paying previous debts, renovating the house, paying for her children's education and investing in a tube-well and a water pump.

Case 3: Proud to be a farmer: An older couple left behind

RKP (72) is living with his wife SKD. They have three sons and three daughters, none of them living with RKP and his wife. The daughters are living with their husbands' families, as is common in this patrilineal society. The sons are government employees, living somewhere else in the country, but not with their parents. RKP says he has been suffering from diabetes, high blood pressure and back pains, but there is no one to help him and his wife with the work. They have to manage their four hectares of agricultural land and all the domestic chores, but RKP seems to be proud of being a farmer. In response to our query about his thoughts on agriculture and the value of land, he said:

> "*I can tell you, there is nothing bigger than agriculture. If you have land you can never go hungry. But the present generation considers agriculture a dirty job. It is obvious that working on the farm is not the neat and clean job the young people like to do. I don't understand why they don't want to be farmers. If you work hard, like when you work abroad, agriculture can give you a good living. At home they become lazy and shameful of their work, but outside they work hard whatever job they get. This is not a good mentality, in my opinion".* (RKP, 6.8.2008)

Both Case 1 (DBB) and Case 3 (RKP) reveal that the older generation highly values agriculture and agricultural land. In their view, only agriculture provides a secure living, more than any other means of livelihood. The cases also indicate how remittances are spent. While it is difficult to assess the actual disbursement of remittances because household expenditure is not strictly planned and budgeted, the household survey provides indications about household expenditures related to land and agriculture. Table 5 presents the averages of these expenditures during the year prior to the survey per migration status of the household.

At first sight, Table 5 does not show significant differences in the pattern of expenditure between migrant and non-migrant households. However, the migrant households had higher overall expenditure than the non-migrant households, which could be expected. Interestingly, migrant households spent more on agricultural inputs and technology than non-migrant households. At the same time, more migrant households than non-migrant households invested in residential land. So, the survey data present a mixed picture, showing that migrant households invest both in agriculture and in residential land. Moreover, as will be revealed from the focus group discussions below, people

Table 5 Household expenditures in selected items during the year prior to the survey

Item	Migrant households			Non-migrant households		
	Mean amount (NPR)[a]	SD	N	Mean amount (NPR)[a]	SD	N
Agricultural inputs	9,437.1	11,343.1	120	8,505.3	7,699.9	113
Agricultural technical services	1,784.2	2,357.6	76	2,430.2	7,079.8	79
Technology (irrigation, tube-well, motor-pumps)	4,045.9	7,204.1	95	3,084.6	3,040.2	87
Purchasing agricultural land	175,000.0	106,066.0	2	172,500.0	83,815.3	4
Purchasing residential land	216,153.8	153,489.3	13	192,857.1	126,057.4	7
Total	169,814.3	130,402.9	136	131,941.1	251,603.1	141

[a] 1 Euro was equivalent to about NPR 100 during the fieldwork time

Source: Household survey 2009

prefer to buy agricultural land first, if they do not have it, for sociocultural reasons. From qualitative interviews it transpired that migrant households are reluctant to spend remittances on day-to-day household expenditure. For example, RBG said, "*Most of the time, I manage the household with my own earnings because I don't want to spend his income for household daily use. His earnings are for the big work and for the future*" (RBG, 12.4.2009). Another respondent said: "*The money he sent is being saved in the Shubha Laxmi Cooperative at Gauradaha, which will be used to build a concrete house later on when he comes back*" (KTS, 22.12.2009). Both respondents are wives of migrant workers and represent the younger generation. Among the 20 respondents with whom qualitative interviews were conducted, only three bought or added agricultural land. Twelve reported to have bought a total of 21 residential plots in nearby towns, ranging from one to six plots each depending on the number of migrants in the households.

Ambivalence: Excerpts from focus group discussions with younger people

To elicit the views of the younger generation, we conducted a focus group discussion with nine male adults aged 18–34 (ages indicated below). All participants had an education up to School Leaving Certificate (SLC) level. Some are studying at 10+2 (higher secondary) level and others at university level. Apart from their study, they help their parents with the agricultural work, but their heart is not in it. They aspire to doing something else in town. Three participants are migrant workers who incidentally were home for a visit at the time of fieldwork. They left school after SLC and went abroad to work. The discussion with them shows that on the one hand, they value land for social prestige and as a basic resource for food production while, on the other hand, agricultural work is not their choice of occupation. They want to do things that yield quick monetary returns, such as building a rental house or starting a grocery in town. For this, labour out-migration has proved to be a means of accessing financial capital for an initial investment. However, the trajectory of investing in land is first to buy agricultural land if one does not have any or very little and then to start buying residential land. In either case, the tendency is not to work in agriculture, yet to have a secured access to food by renting out land and receiving a share of the food produced. Below, we present excerpts of the focus group discussions we conducted on 9 November 2009 with younger men on the valuation of agricultural land and food security. The first question we asked was: Why are the young people so demotivated about agriculture?

> CMG (29): *In agriculture, you work hard but get fewer returns. In such a case, when you work hard but get little income, who would be interested to do so?*
> YRB (34): *If you calculate investment against production from a particular plot of land there is a loss. Once you sow the seed you have to wait for some months, but if you build even a one-storey house, you will get monthly returns regularly by renting it out. That is the reason why people are so motivated to buy residential plots rather than adding to the agricultural land.*

To our question why people needed land in the first place, we received the following answers:

> CMG (29): *Well, the life cycle begins and ends with land, and you ask why do we need land? It is for everything.*
> SJK (18): *The first thing to have land is to be equal in status with your neighbours; otherwise you will not be prestigious in society. Second, to get food from it: you need to have something as a basis for your existence.*

If you have land you will not die of hunger. Hence, people give first priority to land. We are discussing the preference for buying residential land. But that applies only if you already have some agricultural land; if not, you would never decide to buy residential plots instead of agricultural land.
YRB (34): *Yes, you are right! Those who already have agricultural land never add to it. For those who do not have agricultural land, their first priority is to buy some agricultural land. They only think of residential land afterwards, but their first priority is agricultural land. If you see transactions in land business, whether it is agricultural land or residential land, the main buyers are the migrant workers.*
CMG (29): *If we have agricultural land we can at least get food, no matter where we stay.*

Then we wanted to know whether the first function of the land was a place to stay or for food production to eat, all respondents said that the first function is to eat, you can stay on other people's land (renting) or whatever, but if you have your own agricultural land you will not die of hunger. YRB (34) added: *However, now it is also the other way around, people sometimes prioritize land for residence and then think about eating.*

Moving to a slightly different issue, we inquired who were mostly involved in agriculture in the area. The answers were:

SGS (24): *I can see many of them are the older people.*
CMG (29): *The youths are also involved in agriculture, but it is not out of interest. Those youths are landless; they do not have their own place to live, let alone going abroad for work. They are working on other people's land because they do not have an alternative.*
YBK (21): *It is out of necessity. If you have to, you will do that, but the question is whether they are doing it because they want to.*
YRB (34): *Yes, those landless people who do not have alternatives are doing agricultural labour. But there is another group of people also doing agriculture. They are the ones who have very little land, but have many household members. They need more rice than they get from their own farm, they have to rent in others' land.*
YBK (21): *So, the main thing is employment. If they get employed they would not be working in agriculture.*
YRB (34): *The agricultural sector is becoming the last choice among youths.*

The answers given by these younger men clearly show their reluctance to practise agriculture. When they can, they migrate. As a returned migrant said: "*Our family was having a tough time to survive. Running the household was possible only with loans from moneylenders. So finally, being a responsible son, I decided to go out for work*" (GPP, 7.11.2009). Another returned migrant stated:

"I got married and I felt more responsible towards my family and parents. I did not have any jobs here. I saw everyone in the village going out and I felt as if I was the only one left in the village. I saw people coming from abroad with good money, heard stories about the good life there. I thought I should also have such experience and see how the other world is. Then I decided to migrate for work". (NAP, 6.11.2009)

Neither GPP nor NAP practised agriculture for a living after their return. GPP bought a bus for public transport, while NAP started a shop at School Choun, but they never took up full-time farming again. They acknowledged the cultural and social significance of farming and the social status of having land, but they did not want to work on the land. They rather wanted 'dry and tidy' jobs.

The young men think that the land they already have is enough to produce food for their family. If they added more agricultural land, they feared it would remain fallow. Only those who did not have land before their migration wanted to buy agricultural land, just for subsistence or for social status but not as a primary means of production. The younger generation does not disregard the importance of land and wants to keep it but, at the same time, they do not want to work on it. The cases have shown that the older generation is rather positive about agriculture as an occupation and as a reliable basis for food security. In the past, it was their destiny to find the fertile *terai* land and practise agriculture as the best alternative among available livelihood options. However, the younger generation does not want to confine itself to village boundaries doing a 'dirty' job on the land. The sons and grandsons of the early settlers think that the local economy does not meet their increasing demands and rising expectations.

In a study carried out elsewhere in Nepal, Sharma (2008) reported that going to India or other countries is to open up possibilities of being modern and developed, and to demonstrate a 'modern' concept of manhood, which does not only include assuming the role of breadwinner but also migration as a pathway to experience the outside world, while sending money home for the upkeep of the family. Likewise, our research is another example of a clear departure from migration as being caused by economic necessity or the result of exploitation but rather providing an ideational space of development and modernity (Mills 1997; Sharma 2008).

Conclusion

This paper sheds light on how labour out-migration is intertwined with people's livelihood generation, food security and the shifting valuation of land. Evidently, labour out-migration appears to be a strategy to achieve a better quality of life, rather than just to escape poverty and destitution. Further, labour out-migration engenders changes in the perceptions of food security, especially with regard to the role of agriculture and agricultural land as the primary means of production. Access to land and remittances indeed help those left behind to safeguard or attain food security, either through investments in agricultural production or by generating sufficient economic means to buy food.

Although few households in the research area were found to be food insecure, the significance of agricultural land for food security is changing. The meaning of food security also differs according to people's socioeconomic status. Older people believe in having agricultural land for food security as for them the land produces rice (food), while younger people believe in accessing financial capital through other sources in order to acquire food, particularly non-farm labour and migration. Yet, they keep investing in land as a symbol of social status, but not for agricultural purposes. They try to get out of the 'dirty' jobs in agriculture that earns them 'no money'. Their fathers want to increase the acreage of agricultural land, while their sons want to buy residential plots in town. It is important to note that these choices matter only for those who are already food secure. For food insecure people choices are limited, and their priority lies in accessing food (rice) by engaging in agriculture. However, it can be expected that those who are currently resource-poor, once they have improved their socioeconomic status, agriculture and agricultural land will also become less important for food security.

This situation, with a younger generation eventually moving out of agriculture, may have far-reaching implications for Nepal's agricultural and rural development policies. On the one hand, the APP, Nepal's key policy paper for agricultural development and food security, supports the notion of food security by increasing agricultural production. Even though APP remains silent about increasing own production of the households involved, it emphasises increased investment in irrigation, fertilizers, research and motorable roads as drivers for commercial agriculture and employment generation (Cameron 1998). Further, APP has neglected the significance of out-migration for Nepalese livelihoods; it rather asserts that if APP is successful, there will be less out-migration from the rural areas (Cameron 1998). In other words, APP envisages Nepal's development through people's engagement in agriculture and discourages out-migration. On the other hand, the Foreign Employment Act motivates people to work abroad (GON 2007). These two evidently contradictory policies, coupled with the perceived influence of modernity on the mind-set of youths who no longer share the traditional notion of the pivotal role of agricultural land for food security, may jeopardize Nepal's future agricultural development. At the same time, the objective of the APP policy paper was paralysed by the 10-year Maoist insurgency, which forced many rural youths to leave their villages. The Maoist insurgency did not affect the research area much, but countrywide the spread of conflict and political instability provided an incentive for migrant workers, for whom labour migration became part and parcel of their life. This eventually contributed to the declining valuation of agriculture as a rewarding profession and of agricultural land as an essential source of food security.

Thus, the changing landscape of labour organisation and livelihood opportunities in rural areas that are influenced by the process of modernisation and urbanisation has a great impact on food security. People's livelihood practices and access to food are gradually shifting from an agriculture-based economy to an economy that is based on other sources of income. In the long run, not only the role of agriculture in rural livelihoods may be in danger, but the observed shifting valuation of *terai* land may also threaten food security in the country as a whole. The increased out-migration among land-owning households, and the negative attitude of the younger generation towards agriculture may further exacerbate the situation. Households may remain food secure because they may now buy food from income through remittances, but their total acreage of land for agricultural production will decrease. If this trend continues there is a potential risk of a reduction of the total food production in the country which, in the long run, may put the country's food security at risk.

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